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THE HISTORICAL AND LOGICAL RELATIONS BETWEEN FICHTE AND KANT.*

BY R. C. WARE.

Fichte, when eighteen years old, entered the University at Jena, under the theological faculty. While pursuing his studies there, and attempting to gain a comprehension of various theological doctrines, particularly that of the freedom of the will, he was led to reflect deeply on the nature and province of thought. Becoming dissatisfied with the theological doctrine that revelation is the infallible source of truth, and, as such, the standard by which the Reason must measure itself, he finally abandoned that standpoint, and adopted the philosophical doctrine that the Reason is absolutely valid, and is its own judge. Rejecting freedom of the will, he formed for himself a fatalism, or necessitism, which made the human will entirely dependent upon, and determined by the Absolute Reason of the Universe, or God.

His mind still under the influence of this rigid determinism, Fichte began in 1790, when twenty-eight years old, to study the system of Kant. The latter, then sixty-six, had completed his most significant labors, the "Critique of Pure Reason" having been nine years before the public.

*A thesis for the bachelor's degree in Philosophy, at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1876.

In this paper, only those parts of Kant's system which give ground for Fichte's work, and those parts of Fichte's system which grew out of the adoption, modification, or demolition of Kantian doctrines, have been considered.

The following works have been consulted: "Memoir of Fichte," by Dr. W. Smith; "Life of Fichte," by his son, I. H. Fichte; "The Vocation of Man," translated by Dr. Smith; "The Science of Knowledge" and "The Science of Rights," translated by A. E. Kroeger; the following minor writings of Fichte translated by Kroeger, and published in the *St. Louis Journal of Speculative Philosophy*: "Introduction to the Science of Knowledge," "Criticism of Philosophical Systems," "New Exposition of the Science of Knowledge," and the "Sun-clear Statement of the Science of Knowledge." Also Kant's "Critique of Pure Reason," translated by J. M. D. Meiklejohn; Schwegler's accounts of Kant and Fichte in his "History of Philosophy," translated by Stirling, with notes; Ueberweg's accounts of Kant and Fichte in his "History of Philosophy"; C. P. Krauth's account of Kant and Fichte in his edition of Berkeley's "Principles."

The result of the Kantian Philosophy, as will be shown hereafter, was to put an impassable barrier between the human mind and all that is other than it. Things, according to Kant, can never be known as they are in their own nature; they are only known as they appear in the light of Thought, and under the forms which Thought itself imposes. Knowledge and truth are, then, only subjective,* having no objective validity whatever.

Fichte's enthusiastic nature, remarkable for great independence of character and indomitable will, could ill endure the absolute determinism to which, at the beginning of his studies in Kant, he believed himself subject. Thus, dissatisfied, and in search of some degree of self-determination for the mind, he was prepared for an enthusiastic reception of Kant's doctrines. Accordingly, he at first accepted Kant's results without discovering all the implications and contradictions in the system. In the subjective freedom which it gives he found release, for the time, from all his troubles about the freedom of the will. His first impression of Kantianism, and its effect upon his mind, can best be gathered from a passage in a letter written, shortly after becoming familiar with the system,† to the lady who afterwards became his wife.

"A circumstance," he says, "which seemed the result of mere chance, led me to give myself up entirely to the study of the Kantian Philosophy,—a philosophy that restrains the imagination, which was always too powerful with me, gives reason the sway, and raises the soul to an indescribable elevation above all earthly concerns. I have accepted a nobler morality, and instead of occupying myself with outward things, I employ myself more with my own being. This has given me a peace such as I have never before experienced: amid uncertain worldly prospects, I

*The term "subjective" here means "for the human mind only;" and implies that the universality and necessity in human thought have no necessary connection with the Universal Mind, or God. The necessity here spoken of, Kant himself always calls "objective": but this adjective he derives from his own technical noun "object," by which he means the product of the united action of all the faculties of the mind, independent of all peculiar circumstances and individual persons, which gives rise to representations absolutely the same for all human beings, and therefore with propriety called objective. But as Kant held to the common distinction between Thinking and Things as a fundamental principle, we may, for the sake of clearness here, name the necessity of reason a *subjective* one, in accordance with common philosophic usage.

†February, 1791.

have passed my happiest days. I shall devote some years of my life to this philosophy; and all that I write, at least for several years to come, shall be upon it. It is difficult beyond all conception, and stands much in need of simplification. * * * The principles are indeed hard speculations, which have no direct bearing on human life, but their consequences are most important for an age whose morality is corrupted at the fountain-head; and to set these consequences before the world in a clear light, would, I believe, be doing it a good service. * * * I am now thoroughly convinced that the human will is free, and that to be happy is not the purpose of our being—but to deserve happiness.”* Soon after, Fichte began to re-write Kant’s “Critique of the Faculty of Judgment,” but the work was never finished.

In the summer of 1791, Fichte visited Königsberg for the purpose of making Kant’s personal acquaintance. Calling immediately after his arrival, he was much disappointed by the coldness with which he was received by Kant. After trying in vain, for nearly three weeks, to gain a satisfactory interview with the man whom he almost worshipped, Fichte set about writing a “Critique of all Revelation,” to serve as an intellectual introduction to Kant, and gain a free and confidential interview with him. Having labored constantly for five weeks on that work, he sent it, and called five days afterward to learn Kant’s judgment upon it. Kant received him kindly and spoke well of the work, but referred to his “Critique of Pure Reason” or some of his friends for the solution of all Fichte’s difficulties. Thus Fichte again failed to secure the personal friendship and confidence of Kant, a treasure which, as he desired it, he was never to possess.

In the “Critique of all Revelation,” Fichte attempted to determine the grounds and validity of all revelation from God to men. Taking the position that reason is the only tribunal of truth, he maintained that the only authority any revelation can have is its accordance with reason, and that no claims can be made for the reliability of any revelation on account of accompanying miracles. In order to obtain a little money to relieve his immediate necessities, Fichte attempted to dispose of his manuscript to a bookseller. After some delay, he succeeded, with Kant’s help, in making arrangements with Hartung for its publication. The Dean of the Theological Faculty at Halle, however, under whose

*Smith’s translation.

ensorship the work came. would not allow it to appear on account of the passage, above referred to, concerning miracles, although Fichte had added, in a note, that miracles might be of use in attracting attention to revelation. Fichte ineffectually argued that his work was a philosophical one, and therefore did not properly come under the control of the Theological Faculty. His friends urged him, in vain, to strike out the objectionable passage. Fichte was determined his work should be a fair and full exposition of his views, or never see the light. When applying to Kant for advice on the subject, he was told that the work must not be changed, and that the only hope of getting it published, was to convince the censor that what cannot be proved by the reason, may nevertheless be received as morally true by faith. There being, soon after, a change in the censorship at Halle, the book was no longer objected to, and it appeared anonymously in April 1792, attracting great attention and admiration throughout the literary world of Germany. So much was it in unison with the Critical Philosophy, that its authorship was universally attributed to Kant, who publicly denied the honor.

Having become deeply imbued with the results of the Kantian Philosophy, Fichte set about a critical examination of its principles and the results to which they should consistently lead, and thenceforward became less and less a Kantist. In October, 1793, he writes :* "My conviction is that Kant has only *indicated* the truth, but neither unfolded nor proved it. This singular man either has a power of divining truth without being himself conscious of the grounds on which it rests; or he has not esteemed his age worthy the communication of those grounds; or he has shrunk from attracting that superhuman reverence during his life, which sooner or later must be his in some degree." Later he says :† "I have discovered a new principle, from which all philosophy can easily be deduced. * * * In a couple of years we shall have a philosophy with all the clearness of geometrical demonstrations." From June, 1793, Fichte worked at his system, which appeared in 1794, in the "Science of Knowledge."

Kant begins his philosophy with the old Cartesian dualism of Thought and Thing, or Subject and Object, as opposed sides of the world; declaring the gulf between them to be impassable.

*To Niethammer, (Smith's "Fichte's Popular Works" p. 72.)

†To Stephani, (Smith's "Fichte's Popular Works.")

The mind can never know what is not thought, so that the object, or "thing in itself," can never make itself intelligible, and hence can never be known in its own nature. Kant assumes the mind as valid, and sufficiently accounted for by its own sense of consciousness. All knowledge he derives from "two main sources in the mind,"—Sense and Understanding; through the first, the object is "given" by means of "intuitions;" through the second the object is "thought," by means of "conceptions." Intelligible knowledge can only be got by the united action of these two sides in thought: either side without the other is of no avail. The "Thing," however, obstinately persists, and plays an important part in knowledge, since mind is not moved to action until the Thing "comes in contact" with it. This "contact" of the Thing with the mind (called by Kant *sensation*) is the beginning of experience; and experience is the first step in knowledge. But the process, which finally ends in knowledge, having been initiated in sensation, the mind furnishes all the rest out of its own nature. The mind, then, can know only the result of the modification of the Thing by Thought. In this result, all the dominant characteristics flow from the mind's own nature. The result, therefore, is not necessarily like the Thing at all. The mind can only know what is true for *it*; *its* world, *its* theatre of action, is wholly of its own creation; hence it is unlimited by anything save its own nature. This makes it FREE; as Fichte saw, when he first became acquainted with the Kantian Philosophy.

Since, according to Kant, all that can be known of the Thing is that it exists; and since Kant's assumption of it is not only useless, but introduces all sorts of contradictions into his system, reducing it finally to utter skepticism; Fichte discarded Thing altogether, and by making the Ego (or the person) the ground of all thought, and the one principle of the universe, consistently carried out the doctrine that although the mind can know only itself, it can know itself absolutely.

The immediate results of imposing the pure forms of the mind on the sensations occasioned by the Thing, are termed by Kant "sensuous intuitions," or the "*immediate* representations" of the Thing. Kant held that all human intuition must be *sensuous*, and that an *intellectual* intuition is impossible. Fichte saw that the system required *intellectual* intuition, to account for such notions as Virtue and Right, and, most of all, in order that thought's very existence may be known. These notions certainly cannot

be derived from the intuitions of Space and Time. Thought can not prove to itself its own subjective existence without first thinking consciously, and this very immediate self-consciousness of thought *is* an intellectual intuition. But when Fichte appealed to Kant to say whether or not his system did provide for intellectual intuition, Kant declared that it did not. Moreover, he warned the public that Fichte was no true exponent of his. Thereupon, our philosopher "accepted the honor of originating a system."

Fichte starts knowledge in the immediate consciousness of the Ego, as acting or thinking. The Ego, in thinking, is subjective; but in thinking about itself or its own acts, it is objective, or posits itself as object. Thus the whole domain of thought consists of the Ego and its own self-determinations, among which are God and the World. All becomes absolutely knowable, and the skepticism of Kant is converted into absolute knowledge. The freedom of the will (which in Kant was only subjective) becomes objective in Fichte; and Kant's opposition between Thinking and Thing is lost, the Thing becoming wholly a determination of Thought. But Kant would never admit that his system consistently resulted in idealism; and in the second edition of the "Critique of Pure Reason," he inserted a chapter in refutation of idealism.

Kant virtually asserts* the Ego as the true ground of thought, when he says: "The *I think* must accompany all my representations, for otherwise something would be represented in me which could not be thought; in other words the representation would either be impossible, or be, in relation to me at least, nothing." Wherever Kant consistently expresses his system, he brings out the absolute self-existence of the Ego. From this position Fichte derives his doctrine that the real unity of thought is in the self-determination of the Ego, and that all the principles of thought must be derived from one fundamental thought as ground. This principle is that of Identity, which Fichte puts in the form *Ego=Ego*, a form directly given by the self-consciousness of the mind. This is the self-positing of the Ego as subject.

In his "transcendental exposition" of the Categories, Kant tries to show that they are applicable to objects of *intuition*. All

*In the section on "The Originally Synthetical Unity of Apperception" in the "Critique of Pure Reason."

that he does show is that they are applicable to objects of *experience*. Kant really takes up the Categories empirically, *i. e.*, as he finds them in experience, instead of getting them logically, as he should do, from the very nature of the mind. Fichte saw that as all the principles of thought are grounded in one, so all the Categories, or forms of thought, should be reducible to one. Consequently, he set about this reduction, and succeeded in bringing them all under the Principle of Causality.

Kant, as we have seen, closes his theory of knowledge in an absolute skepticism. He was not, however, content to leave his work there; so he made a practical philosophy, which was intended to counteract the effect of his theoretical system. Its principle was, that though mind cannot know the real nature of the objective worlds, it can know perfectly well its own subjective conditions; and, as that is the only knowledge it can have, all action *must* be in accordance with that. The "Categorical Imperative" for human beings is the voice of human reason, which must be made objective for them. Fichte accepts this situation most heartily. Having shown the theoretical province of thought, he sees that mere contemplation without action is no being at all. In order that the ideal of thought may become realized, the will must act in accordance with intelligence, and in fulfillment of it. Only in the united action of all the threefold self-determinations of personality is there real being. Feeling, intellect, and will are the *inseparable* modes of the manifestation of true life.

Kant thought that the revolution which he originated in philosophy, was in making truth consist, not in the conformity of thinking with the nature of things, but in making things take on the forms of thought, and in knowing what are their appearances under these conditions. The revolution which he did bring about came to light in Fichte. It consisted in showing that an unknown and unknowable *thing in itself* is impossible in any consistent and reasonable philosophy.
